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A Closer Look

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A Closer Look

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Report

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Abstract
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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

SUPERVISOR: Dan Sutherland

The following text is intended to increase my reader's knowledge of various aspects of my artwork and how I have arrived at what I am currently making. I focus specifically on what I consider to be my main body of work, which has evolved over a number of years.

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Introduction

To a large extent the things I make are the product of manual labor. Insights are often gained in the studio while working. Experimentation, accidental discoveries, intuitive responses, and the process of visualizing procedures and outcomes in my mind are important to the development of my work.

The relationship I have to my own work is emergent. While the objects I produce are discrete, they are also elements in a wider arena of involvement. I frequently build upon what I have already made and reconsider earlier directions. New ideas are nourished by an ongoing flexibility with all aspects of my process at all stages of production.

In the following text I hope to increase my reader's knowledge of some aspects of my work, how I consider it, and how I have arrived at what I am currently making. I will be focusing on what I consider my main body of work, which is an expansion of abstract painting. I additionally make prints, drawings, digital images, sculptures and site generated installations, which inform and overlap with this work, but I will not be accounting for everything here.

Finding Contour, Finding Process- Specific Shapes

A product of my own activity, my present work is also in conversation with the history of abstract art and employs various agents of abstract painting and sculpture. Since the objects I create are specific and their address to perception is direct, I do not think of the work I make as “abstract.” However, I have arrived at my current work, the forms I create and the procedures I use, by way of an engagement with abstract painting.



Figure1. Untitled stretchover, acrylic and oil paint stretched over MDF and walnut (2015)

Before I was even aware of the concept of abstraction, I had an inclination towards painting without representation. I was introduced to Kandinsky's work by my brother as a teenager, and from that introduction quickly realized there was already precedence for the type of painting I was doing at that time. I do not recall which Kandinsky painting I first saw but do remember the sensation of seeing organized color and form without apparent depiction. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was the first theory I read about abstract art. Kandinsky's conviction in the spiritual power of art and the parallels that he drew between abstract painting and music resonated with me. He was the first artist I was aware of who seemed to corroborate my own proclivities.



Figure 2. Untitled early painting, oil on canvas (2000)

For a period of time I worked in a mode that resembled the kind of early twentieth century abstraction, which retained the compositional features of landscape painting. I include artists such as Author Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe, Paul Klee, Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky in this grouping. Although the imagery I painted had some relation to these artists, what I was doing differed in its basic approach, since the emphasis in my work had always been on a more reflexive relationship with image and material. The early twentieth century abstract artists I mentioned were creating abstract pictures based on specific observations of the world around them, on memory or in the case of early Kandinsky, iconography drawn from the bible and theosophy (Long, 1972). For these artists painting was still based in picture making. I have always taken a more empirical approach. I aimed to create things that described only themselves rather than referring to a depicted object, scenario or space. My approach was not based on an explicit philosophy or rule; it had more to do with developing awareness while doing, and this continues to be a generative way for me to work.

I gradually started painting more condensed arrangements of specific shapes and colors. Kandinsky's work from the early part of the century often involved a few inventive and compelling shapes near the center of his canvas, but other parts of the compositions did not contain this same force. I wanted my entire work to operate similar to the central forms in Kandinsky's paintings.



Figure 3. Wassily Kandinsky, “Composiition IV” oil on canvas (1911)

Around the year 2000 I made a painting that, more than others, led me in the direction of my current work. In its first stages it was like most work I was making at that time; the forms had soft edges and were lacking both specificity and inventiveness. While working on it, I was searching for new shapes by cutting and tearing scraps of paper (I now know this is a method Jean Arp used in creating some of his compositions). During this process I produced a shape with a single straight edge combined with irregular curves. The shape had a kind of severed bilateral symmetry. I placed the paper in the center of the canvas and brushed out from the center of the piece with yellow ocher. When I removed the piece of paper I was surprised by the work in front of me.



Figure 4. Untitled painting made using a stencil, oil on canvas (2001)

As a result of its sharp contours, the image was more precise and concentrated than anything I had made before. Hard-edged circumjacent contours had the effect of clearly delineating two separate areas on the canvas, locking them in place, and creating a centralized shape with added visual drive. The clear boundaries between areas also complicated the figure/ground relationship.

The process of masking helped me recognize the non-painterly potential of the medium. Paint as a material is not necessarily bound to the conventions of its

history or the index of the hand/brush. The technique of masking also directed me to a more rigorous exploration of irregular shape and well-defined contour.

As I continued to use masking I found the process to be limiting for making changes while I was working, so I learned how to create the edges required with a brush and palette knife. The acquisition of paint handling skills allowed for a certain degree of precision that has remained an important feature of my work. Another feature of my work that came out of this period was the tendency to hide much of my labor. This is how I am able to achieve certain visual effects. If I execute a procedure well, then it should appear effortless and essential.



Figure 5. Untitled painting, acrylic on canvas (2005)

Integrating the Support I

My present work has a dependency on painting and has developed out of my involvement with the physical structure of painting. I conflate my aesthetic interests with the physical apparatus of the medium.



Figure. 6 Untitled stretchover, acrylic paint stretched over acrylic and fiberglass mesh on MDF (2015)

Paint seems to have an endless potential for image production but also has its qualities as a substance. A person can paint a wall a specific color and the wall is transformed; through this process the sensory experience and the physical surface of the wall are changed all at once.

Paint, canvas and stretcher bars are often invisible in works of art. The paint is seen but not as paint, and the canvas and stretcher bars serve an ancillary purpose. Through the activity of painting, these ingredients are compounded together to form entities that are simultaneously physical and psychic.

Much of modern painting has had a more literal relationship to the constituent parts that make up paintings thereby turning prior painting conventions on their head. Robert Ryman is an example of an artist who throughout his career has thoroughly isolated and considered the material aspect of the medium of paint as well as its support structure; I relate my own work to his in this respect.



Figure 7. Robert Ryman “Arrow” Oil on sanded plexiglass panel, four sanded plexiglass fasteners and hexagonal cadmium plated steel bolts (1976)

II- Fabric

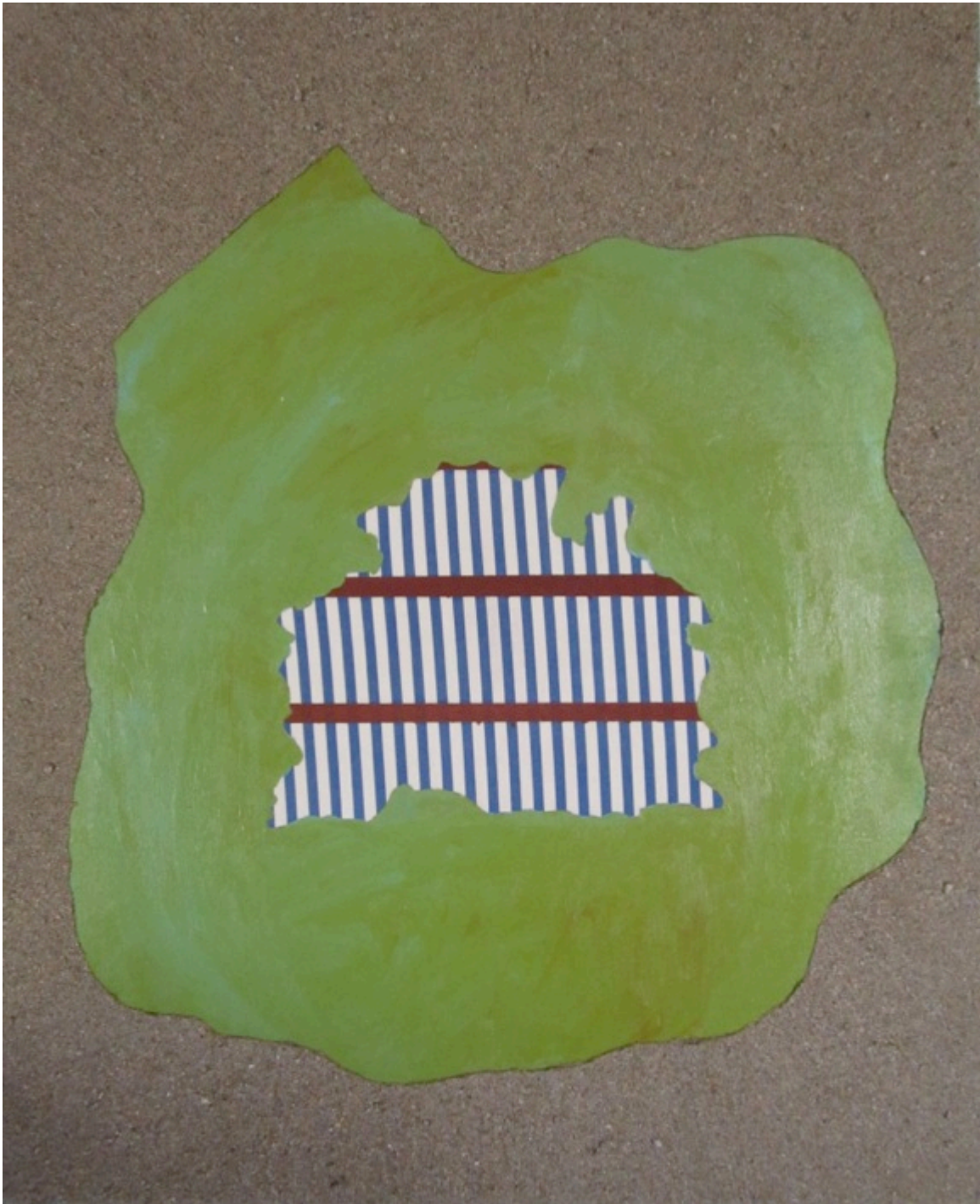


Figure 8. Untitled painting on printed fabric, homemade sand paint and acrylic on cotton (2002)

I became consciously aware of the potential for integrating the substrate of a painting with an image when I first saw the work of Sigmar Polke. Rauschenberg is an earlier precedent for example, but his work made less of a direct impact on me. After becoming familiar with Polke's paintings on patterned textiles, I too began to experiment with painting on surfaces other than canvas. First I worked on different types of fabric and made a whole body of work using acrylic on pre-patterned textiles, then I experimented with foam, wood, bark, stone and eventually I started painting on glass.



Figure 9. Sigmar Polke "Ashes to Ashes" oil and ink on printed fabrics and velour (1992)

III- Discovering Glass + Light and Space

My decision to explore glass as a painting surface was directly influenced by two experiences that occurred around the same time. The first experience was spending time in Larry Bell's studio in Taos, New Mexico, which is filled with all manner of interesting light transmitting and reflective materials including vacuum coated glass. The second was seeing an exhibition of Fred Tomaselli's work for the first time at Site Santa Fe in 2002.



Figure 10. Larry Bell, "Untitled" vacuum-coated glass, chromium-plated brass (1968)

The harnessing of surface phenomena that Bell achieved with his glass cubes was immediately appealing to me and so was the peculiarity of his craft. The appearance of Bell's glass cubes have everything to do with how they are made, however the labor is so imbedded in what the work is, and the processes are so unusual, that the means deployed are rendered invisible.

During this time, I was using a process of layering in my work and to some degree dealing with collage; in Tomaselli's work I saw these approaches taken to beautiful and unexpected territory. Work made by Bell and Tomaselli differs to a great degree, and the two artists use transparency in almost opposite ways. Interestingly, when I finally met Tomaselli in 2016 he said that when he started his resin/collage pieces he was trying to make a kind of “garage version of light and space art.”

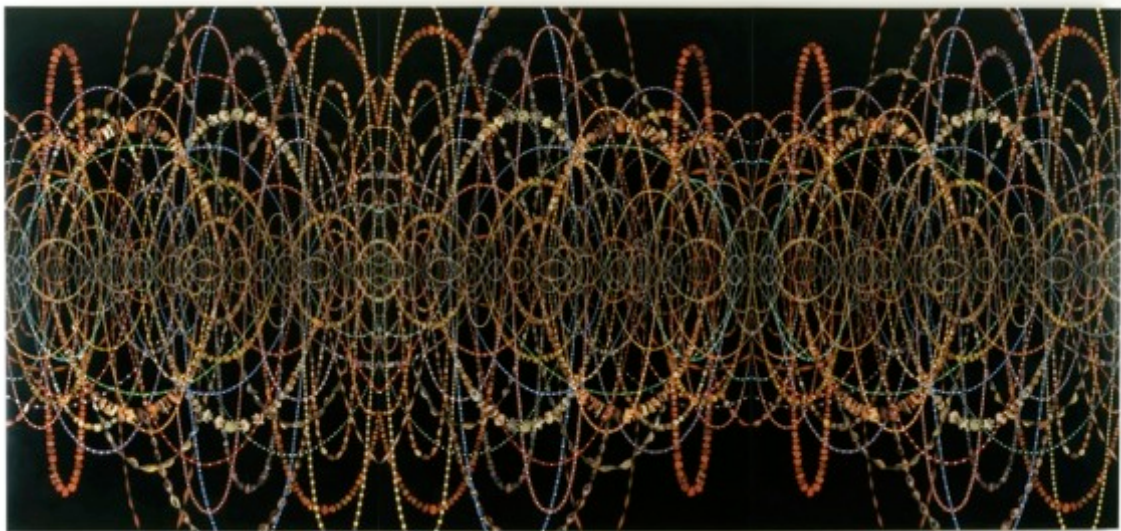


Figure 11. Fred Tomaselli “Flipper” photo collage, acrylic and resin on wood panel (2008)

When I first started to paint on glass, I too had in mind bringing some of the features of west coast light and space back into painting. Robert Irwin, for example, worked his way out of painting into site-conditioned work (Irwin, 2011), but for me there is something distinct and interesting about an object. Objects possess a degree of stability; they ostensibly stay the same while the things around them are in motion. I am generally interested in Irwin's work, but have seen it lose all its impact without the right conditions. I attempt to make things that will retain visual interest in a range of environments.

Philosophically, I am interested in some of the same things that Irwin talks about, particularly his concern for precognitive perception and the notion that we delimit much of what we experience in the process of translating our phenomenal interface with the world into abstract thought (Irwin, 2011). However, the things that I am making right now have more in common visually with the work produced by the object makers who began developing their work in California at the same time as Irwin, such as Ken Price and Helen Pashgian.

IV- Glass + Form and Phenomena

When I started painting on glass I realized if I painted a shape on it, the shape would remain stationary while the surface of the glass would reflect the environment and register changes in it. The relationship between static and transitory features continues to interest me, and I have come to see the conjunction of form and phenomena as one of the central themes of my work.

V- Working on Glass

Single panes of glass became my primary surface for painting on in 2002. I continued to work on glass for about ten years. During that time, I made work that incorporated the surface of the glass into my compositions, often highlighting different physical and visual properties of the material and its interplay with paint and other materials, particularly fiberglass-mesh. I often painted on both sides of a single pane, working in reverse on one side, and working on both faces throughout the process. Applying paint to both sides of the glass allowed me to deal with transparency in a way that confused the relationship between physical and visual surfaces.

I initially placed the paintings on glass in thin premade aluminum frames in order to hang them on the wall. The aluminum frames were a temporary solution so that I could focus on developing other aspect of the work. I was occupied primarily with creating nested shapes/surfaces enclosed within a rectangular format.



Figure 12. Untitled painting on glass in aluminum frame (2006)

In 2008 I began exploring the space that existed between the glass and the wall. This slight increase in the object-ness of my paintings forced me to reconsider the overall physical structure of my work. I soon abandoned the aluminum frames and started to mount my glass surfaces onto the open side of a wooden cradled panel. Switching to this new support resulted in a shallow box that consisted of five wood sides and one of glass. The new support hung on the wall and maintained the profile of the aluminum frames I was using prior.



Figure 13. Cradled panels being built

Leaving a small space between the glass and what was seen behind it transformed the central shapes in my paintings into apertures. I began enclosing tightly drawn grids inside of the openings. Investigating the visual relationship between the surface of the glass and the grid, I started to create hand painted lenticulars by coating the reverse side of the glass with clear paint medium. Using a brush, I would build the medium up in layers with alternating vertical and horizontal strokes to create tiny clear grooves on the surface of the glass, which had the effect of altering the way light traveled through it. The surface aberration caused by the transparent brush strokes interacting with the regularity of the grids caused optical effects such as vibration and warping. A person's movement while viewing the work activated these features.

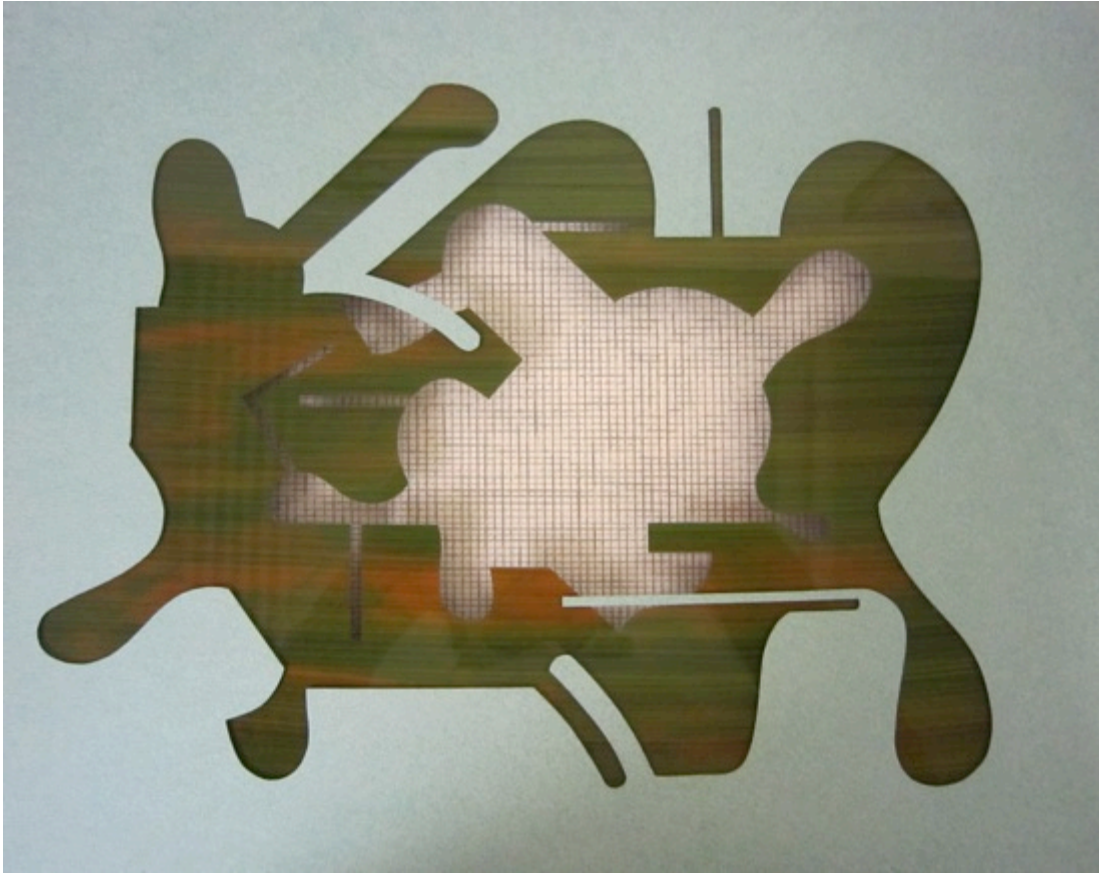


Figure 14. Untitled painting on glass mounted on cradled panel (2011)

VI- Concentration + Color Calibration

As an undergraduate at the school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) the paintings on glass started to reach a much higher level of refinement. Faculty at the school helped me to improve the work I was making. I began condensing my shapes and overall configurations so that they were more clearly discernable. This was an improvement because the shapes in the previous work were becoming complicated, and the complexity had the effect of working against the overall unity of the work. Barbara Rossi helped me to concentrate more on the specific color relationships, how the colors were working with each other changing

the character of the shapes. This led me to a greater understanding of color and how it was functioning in my work.

One thing I began to do was use black and white to gain more control over color by calibrating a single hue in relation to black and white. Two artists I was looking at were Frederick Hammersley and Alfred Jensen. Both used black and white to bracket other colors in their work, and this influenced my own approach.



Figure 15. Untitled painting on glass with black and white (2012)



Figure 16. Frederick Hammersley "Tango #5" Oil on linen (1978)

I also began to look more carefully at pottery and ceramic artists. For example, Mimbres black and white pottery became very interesting to me at this time. The contemporary ceramicist Sam Chung also uses black and white to bracket other colors in his porcelain cloud vases. His work blends elegance and funk, an aesthetic combination I think manifests in my work as well.



Figure 17. Sam Chung “Cloud Vase” (2013)

I have always been interested in the Chicago Imagists and the Hairy Who's use of eccentric shapes in their work, particularly Barbara Rossi. However, seeing some drawings by Myron Stout at the Art Institute of Chicago began to influence the direction of shape in my work while I was there. Stout often spent years working on a single piece. The slow concentrated process he used to arrive at his forms coincides with a kind of intensity I feel when looking at his work.



Figure 18. Myron Stout "Apollo" oil on canvas (1955)

VII- Shaped Supports/ Low Relief

Small by the standards of the contemporary art world, my current work rarely exceeds 18 x 24 inches. People often want to view my work very closely, because it draws them in to further investigate what they are looking at. The work reveals

itself in different ways when seen from different distances and from different points of view. The scale of the work allows for this type of interaction.



Figure 19. Untitled stretchover, acrylic paint stretched over walnut with cork inlay (2016)

I came into my undergraduate program at SAIC making small paintings on glass. The work had been developed at home, and the scale was usefully manageable. Some of my peers and professors suggested that I evolve my work by making it larger in size, but it seemed to me that as the work got bigger it transformed into

something different. This change was enough that some aspects of the work I was interested in were getting lost. When I made anything larger than 24 X 30 inches the work compelled a kind of distance from the person looking at it. I realized that smaller scale was one of the idiosyncrasies of my work. The inner logic of the work necessitated something other than a scale shift. To open it back up, the ancillary features of the work, the glass surface and the cradled panel structure seemed to require an overhaul.

At SAIC I took a class where I learned how to create shapes through CAD software and cut them out on a laser cutter. The laser cutter provided the kind of precision and intense concentration of energy that I was looking for in my work. After I cut my first shape out of Masonite with the laser cutter, I knew I could use it to create a shaped substrate for my work. I started making work by designing shapes in Adobe Illustrator and cutting them out of masonite and cast acrylic (plexiglass). Cut pieces of laminated masonite replaced the cradled panel, and cut cast acrylic replaced the glass.

The first shaped support piece I made with the laser cutter was in black and white. I was already working with black and white on glass and the paired down colors gave me a better look at what I was dealing with as a structure. By unifying the understrate and overstrate of my work to a greater degree, I created something that was in some ways more solid and unified as an object but also less stable visually. In order to begin to understand what the shapes were doing outside of the rectangle, I started to use the orthogonals in my work as a kind of control. The

shapes were not confined by a rectangular format anymore though they were emerging from years of incubation within that environment.



Figure 20. Early shaped piece, acrylic on Masonite and Plexiglas (2012)

The sharp contours from my previous work had an added physical dimension in this shaped work, and it became possible to round over the edges of the shapes

by sanding them since they were made out of wood. I became attentive to the slight degree of form that the work was starting to have, and this added dimensionality permitted new ways to approach what I was making. The apertures remained a part of the work, but I also began inlaying material into some of the openings.



Figure 21. Shaped piece with rounded edges and wood inlay, acrylic on masonite and plexiglass with offset print (2012)

VIII- Scrutiny

There is a cliché that in graduate school you are supposed to break your work down so that you can rebuild. After my second semester in the MFA program at the University of Texas at Austin, I created a piece where I literally took the components of a work away from each other and treated them as separate

entities. This analysis actually revealed a lot to me and opened the work back up in an interesting way. When I treated the parts as individuals, it allowed me to reconsider everything. In this piece I was left to deal with a carved form, an inlay and an aperture without the relational features that previously defined them.



Figure 22. Work separated into three parts (2015)



Figure 23. Single element from deconstructed work, vacuum formed plastic and offset print mounted on wood (2015)

Stretchovers I- The Convergence of an Earlier Idea With New Developments



Figure 24. First Stretchover, acrylic medium stretched over wood (2005)

In 2005 I made a painting by layering clear paint medium on a sheet of glass, then peeling it off and stretching it over a small rectangular strainer that I had already painted a texture on. I stretched it the same way people stretch canvas and stapled and glued the paint to the back of the frame. This piece took a great deal of effort for me to achieve at the time, and I went through several combinations of acrylic mediums to create a film that was not too soft so that it would sag, or

tacky so it would stick to itself or collect dust, and not so brittle that it would crack or shatter when dropped. The medium had to be able to keep its tension on the support. When I finally figured out the right recipe of mediums I made a handful of rectangular stretchover paintings, some more opaque and others transparent.

One of the surprising things about this process is that by removing canvas and just working with the paint and stretcher bars I was able to open up a whole new range of possibilities for making a painting.

While in undergraduate school I successfully created two shaped stretchover pieces using laminated masonite for the strainers. At this time plexiglass was the primary transparent material I was using in my work. Plexiglass was a more suitable material than glass because it could be cut on the laser cutter to exactly register with the shape of the masonite substrate. Plexiglass offers a great range of possibility for inherent color, color transmission, light absorption and reflectance. These are some of the properties that Donald Judd used the plexiglass for in his work. The stretched pieces on the other hand were so labor intensive, and I could achieve much of the same effects I was interested in with plexiglass. I continued making shaped pieces with plexiglass and abandoned the stretched paint idea for the time being.



Figure 25: Donald Judd, red florescent plexiglass and stainless steel (1965)



Figure 26. Shaped piece with orange florescent plexiglass, laser etched MDF and acrylic on MDF, plexiglass and offset print (2012)

When I got into graduate school it was one of my ambitions to push the dimensionality of my work to a greater extent. One of the ways that I approached this was to model the shapes in Rhino and to use the CNC router to carve into them so as to create a more dimensional surface. Another way was to build on top of a flat plane by joining separate pieces of wood.



Figure 27. Side view of work with undulating topography modeled in Rhino (2015)

Dissatisfied by both the process and the results of using the CNC router and the laser cutter, I eventually started to cut all my shapes out using the band saw so that I could have a more immediate relationship with the material. With a band saw I could bevel the edges of my shapes at the same time as the contours were being decided. Using my hands, I was working in a manner closer to how I worked when I was painting on glass, having a more direct and reflexive relationship to all aspects of the work.

II- Current Work



Figure 28. Red Stretchover, acrylic medium and oil paint stretched over mixed wood (2015)

The work I am making now is comprised of a wood substrate that possesses intersecting flat and curved planes with beveled edges joined with formed surfaces. Much of the work projects off the wall to a greater degree than earlier work, sometimes projecting more than its other dimensions. With these structures I am finally starting to deal with what can properly be called form.

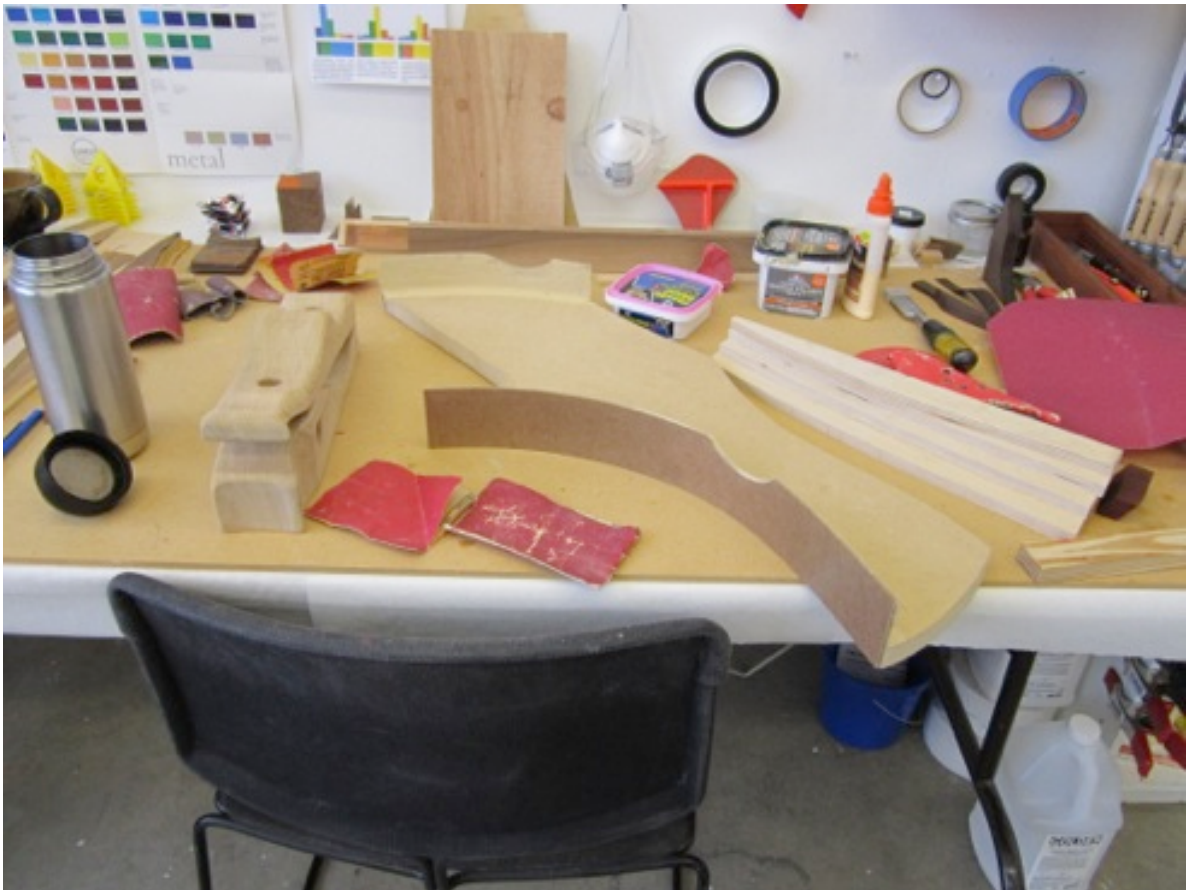


Figure 29. Studio with wood structures under construction (2016)



Figure 30. Stretchover with dyed wood and analogous color stretched (2016)

I usually paint or dye the wood before I stretch paint medium over it. Since color can be applied to the substrate as well as the stretched paint surface I am exploring the possibilities for glazing and multivalent color interactions. In these interactions, colors shift as a person moves around the work, and at the same time, the colors are absorbed into one another. This absorption creates the appearance of new hues in the pockets of space that the work contains. Applying thin layers of analogous hues to the surface of the stretched paint and to the

substrate complicates the apparent density or weight of the work. Sometimes a piece can appear solid and heavy and at other times seem to possess more volume than it actually does. Much of how these aspects of the objects are perceived depends on how light, surface, and color are interacting with the forms.

Because of the nature of acrylic paint and the way I am applying it with a brush, I can adjust its tensile strength and the degree to which it conforms to its underlying structure when it is stretched. When the material is stretched it creates a kind of elastic membrane both covering and binding with the object, fixing it in a state of latent metamorphosis. Sometimes, the membrane seems to describe the space within and other times it creates ambiguity. Adjustments can be made through the thickness of paint layers and the brushwork used to build them up. Modifications in viscosity and facture can change other features of the work such as texture, transparency and translucency, therefore the way that light from the surrounding environment interacts with the work.

Using clear acrylic paint medium is allowing me to continue to employ transparency as one of the primary materials in my work. Transparency is a feature of visual perception that can bring to awareness both color and surface as environmental phenomena. I can create surfaces and films that blur, distort, magnify, shimmer or seem to transmit soft light from behind them.



Figure 31. Untitled tretchover (view from left side) acrylic stretched over Wenge and MDF (2016)



Figure 32. Untitled stretchover (view from right side) acrylic stretched over Wenge and MDF (2016)



Figure 33. Untitled stretchover, acrylic stretched over butternut (2016)

In my current work I continue to employ lenticular effects, which are created through the structure of the brush marks interacting with pattern or texture existing at specific spatial intervals behind the stretched paint. Now that my work is becoming more dimensional new possibilities are opening up in terms of these types of visual effects.



Figure 34. Black and white stretchover with lenticular effects, acrylic stretched over acrylic paint and fiberglass mesh on MDF (2016)

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Vita

Zachary Richard Meisner was born in Rio Fernando de Taos, New Mexico on December 27 1984. He was born in the family home in a blizzard. He had an early career as a snowboarder with sponsorships by manufactures such as Burton and Oakley. Much of his background in making things comes from building stuff growing up in New Mexico such as tree forts and “alien transmitters” in the woods along with shaping snow for snowboard jumps. Meisner’s father held a long career as an industrial paint contractor, his grandfather decorative painter, and great grandfather a housepainter. At different points in his life, Meisner worked as a painter for his father’s business as well as working in other trades such as heating and cooling and as a snow shoveler for Winter Park Resort where he also coached the snowboard team from 2002 to 2009.

This manuscript was typed by the author.